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special feature Travel

A spectacular outdoor PLAYGROUND

By Margaret Davis

Utah can be easily overlooked among the huge range of holiday destinations on offer in a country as vast as the United States.

Mention Salt Lake City to any Brit, and it will conjure up images of Mormons, weak beer and the 2002 Winter Olympics.

In fact, Utah has much more to offer than that, especially for holidaymakers wanting to escape the daily grind and shake off the cobwebs in a spectacular outdoor playground.

The western state is perhaps best known for skiing and winter sports, but remains a quite breathtaking rocky wilderness when there is no snow on the ground.

Its landscape ranges from Alpine-esque mountains to the red rock made famous by the movie *Thelma And Louise* and legendary cowboy actor John Wayne.

The Swiss Mormons who first settled in Midway's Heber Valley, less than an hour's drive from Salt Lake City airport, were drawn to the Wasatch Mountains because they were reminded of their home nation.

Their legacy lives on in a slightly eccentric shape at the Swiss-themed Zermatt resort, where visitors are greeted by a bronze statue of a bear playing an accordion - in tribute to a man who would don fancy dress every year on Swiss Day.

Meticulous attention has been paid to the interior, with furnishings, carvings and wood sourced from Europe, and it is a very relaxing place to stay.

Even in the absence of snow, the area is a beautiful place to visit. In early October we were treated to the blazing reds and yellows of the autumn leaves - a perfect backdrop for pony trekking in the foothills nearby.

It was a fun and novel way to see the countryside, and meant we could avoid crawling up steep slopes ourselves. There could not have been a better remedy to soothe away the shop-soiled feeling of long-haul flights and jetlag.

Fly-fishing is also on offer nearby, while more sedate visitors can sample a unique geological feature.

The Homestead Resort, opposite Zermatt in Midway, boasts a natural crater filled with warm spring water all year round, encased by a beehive dome of rock.

Further south, the landscape radically changes with Grand Canyon-style scenery.

Fuel yourself up for a walk at Ray's in Green River, a genuine American road house with pool tables, jukebox and great burgers.

This is the beginning of film-set style surroundings which leave visitors with a huge smile - and stopping every two minutes to take photos.

Dead Horse Point, half a mile from where the dramatic climax of *Thelma And Louise* was filmed, gives a jaw-dropping view, looking out over the Colorado River. Without the water, you could be forgiven for thinking you were on Mars.

The spine-tingling sights continue in Arches

National Park, with its monoliths and sheer rock faces. Utah is simply vast, and it is a unique feeling to be surrounded by yawning miles of natural landscape.

But visitors do not just come to stand and stare. A wide range of outdoor activities are available throughout the year.

For the more adventurous holidaymaker, there is white-water rafting on the Colorado River, led by expert guides who steer rubber vessels between the rocks.

It's genuine fun for any group, with stretches of calm, flat water punctuated by adrenalin-pumping rapids. The ride is like a log flume crossed with a rollercoaster.

Moab, the small town where raft operator Sheri Griffiths is based, attracts hordes of active types all through the summer and has a sprinkling of shops, bars and restaurants which cater for the crowds.

It has a friendly and welcoming feel, including great Mexican food and Miguel's Baja Grill, but if you fancy a few drinks after dinner remember to take ID with you. In some bars you may also need to become a member and pay a fee of a few dollars, or buy a bowl of fries or nachos to have with your drinks.

Although Moab is a town, it is really all about the natural landscape. Parts of *Thelma And Louise* were filmed in the surrounding area, including where the pair blow up a truck.

There is also the slightly unnerving sight of the deserted town of Cisco, which once thrived but



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where a only a handful of people now live. Once you've finished soaking up the atmosphere around Moab, a more relaxed river expedition awaits on the San Juan River, leaving from Bluff. The archaeological trip will see your guide explain the spectacular geology of the surrounding area, with stops to see ancient paintings and ruins on the way.

However, both the boat trips come with a health warning: in the sun they would be fantastic (with all usual precautions in place), but in autumnal rain it gets COLD. So bring waterproofs and warm clothes to avoid grumpy faces.

The rafting in particular will get you completely, utterly and absolutely soaked, even through the splash suits provided.

There is also the unavoidable need, being out in the wilderness, to pee in bushes near the river. And even if you manage to hold it in all day, the loos in the national parks are compost toilets, so you really can't avoid being in touch with nature in every way.

The differences between the rural life here and that in most parts of the UK was brought home by the fact that San Juan County got its first mobile-phone mast in the week I visited. It had caused some genuine anger in the area, but for holiday-makers it makes it a much more attractive destination.

Another great place to embrace the great outdoors is Capitol Reef National Park, which has a variety of hikes. The Sulphur Canyon route, classed as moderate, was mostly easy going but we visited when the river water was "higher than it had been for five years" according to our guide Scott.

This meant a good deal more scrambling over rock ledges and climbing down fairly steep drops than intended, but it was fantastic fun. Just make sure no-one minds getting their shoes and trousers thoroughly drenched.

Coming back to urban surroundings, Salt Lake City is a pleasant and nicely laid-out town, with chances for fine dining and a night out in a bar, as well as good shopping during the day.

So when you plan your next holiday, give Utah a chance - you'll come back fully refreshed and fired up with a new enthusiasm for the outdoors.

travel facts

❖ Margaret was a guest of Utah Office of Tourism and she flew to Salt Lake City via Chicago with United Airlines.

❖ United Vacations offers seven-night fly-drive visits to Utah this summer from £565, including return flights into Salt Lake City (via Chicago), free connecting flights into London from six regional UK airports, and seven days's fully-inclusive car rental (tax and car insurance included).

❖ United Vacations also offers a 12-day pre-packaged fly-drive tour of the Canyons, via Nevada, Arizona, Utah and Colorado from £1,035, incl return sched flights ex-London, into Las Vegas, all taxes and free connecting flights from six regional airports.

❖ United Vacations reservations: 0844 499 2299 and www.unitedvacations.co.uk.

key facts Utah

❖ Best for: Outdoor adventure and stunning scenery.

❖ Time to go: All year you can experience white tops (for

hikers) to red rocks, for summer adventurers.

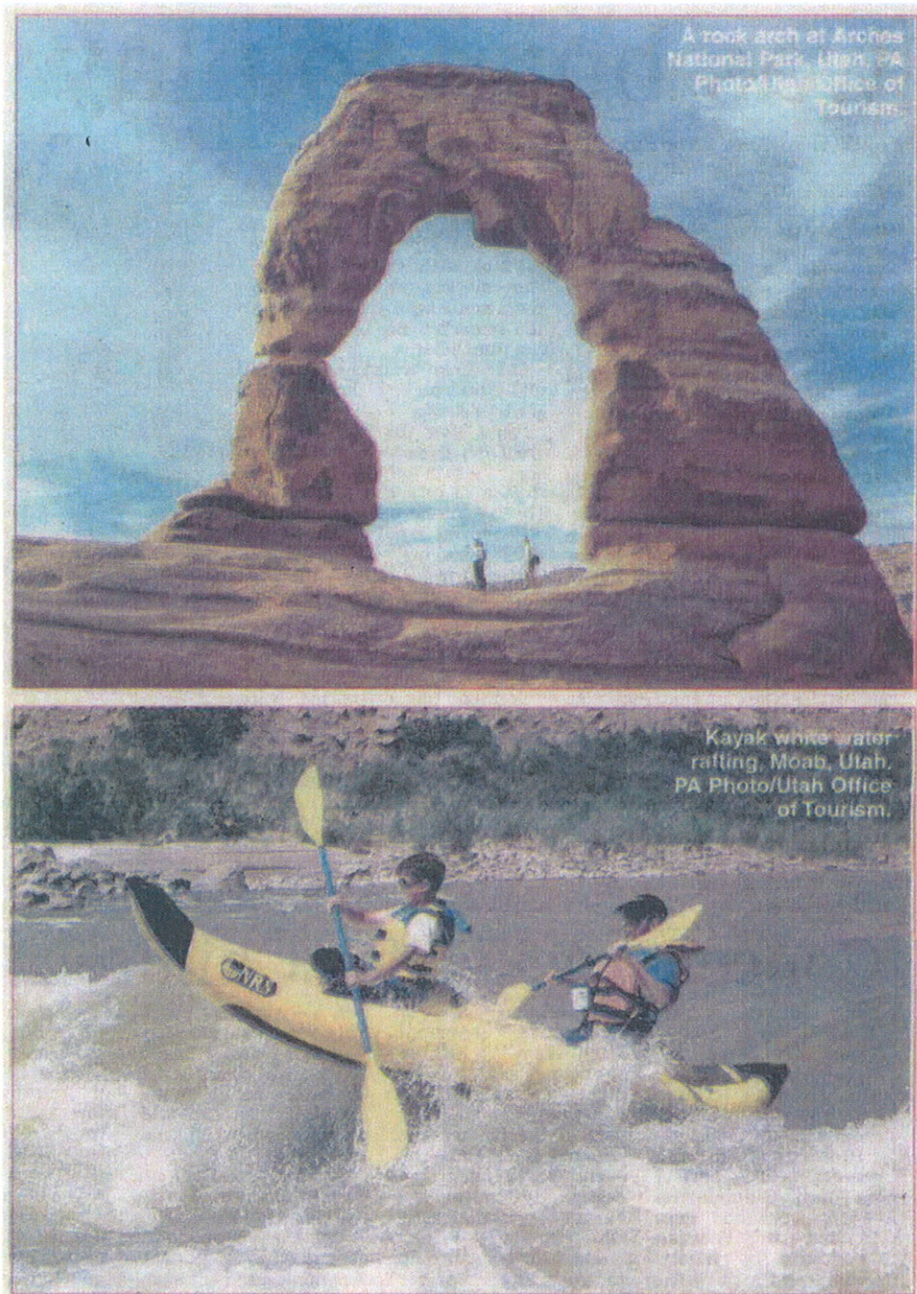
❖ Don't miss: Five national parks which are stunning for scenery and native American culture.

❖ Need to know: As it is not a dry state, you can drink alcohol. Also, this is the home of umpteen movies, from John Wayne to Tom Cruise.

❖ Don't forget: Your camera.

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